

Public forests are important to Oregonians for different reasons. Ask a logger or mill worker about the value of forests and they will probably talk about the relationship of forests to their livelihood and their desire to work outside with their hands.

Ask a conservationist and you will hear about the role forests play in purifying the water we drink, filtering the air we breathe, and sustaining the incredible wildlife we marvel at.

Ask a fisherman, hiker, or hunter and you will get different -- but equally compelling -- answers.

Regardless of your perspective, Oregonians have at least one thing in common: we care deeply about our forests and depend on them for the many values they provide.

It should be from this common interest that we attempt to solve the crisis our public forests face: hundreds of thousands of acres of Western Oregon forests are unnaturally dense, dying from disease and drought, and/or prone to catastrophic fire. The economic, environmental, and social benefits we derive from our forests are being severely degraded as a consequence.

Over the last two decades we have made little progress in addressing our forest health crisis. False starts and unmet promises from Democratic and Republican administrations, a maze of regulations and unscientific restrictions, time consuming lawsuits, and distrust between key stakeholders have prevented responsible forest management.

Last summer, I began a process in Oregon to break the gridlock. I convened a series of public meetings with key stakeholders, lead field trips into the woods with forestry experts and

members of local communities, and brought Secretary of the Interior Ken Salazar to Roseburg to hear from Oregonians directly. Everyone agreed that the status quo was unacceptable.

To overcome decades of failure, we have to take risks and try new things. I have advocated for test projects to examine new, scientifically-based strategies to manage our forests. The test projects should evaluate new ways to accomplish key priorities such as watershed restoration, forest resiliency, and a sustainable supply of timber. This is not locking in a new forest policy, but simply allows independent scientists to try new ideas. By giving all stakeholders an opportunity to evaluate the results, everyone becomes part of the solution.

Work on designing the projects and establishing a schedule for implementation has already begun. Public hearings, field tours, and workshops will be held in Southwest Oregon throughout the year to seek community buy in and local support. The test projects are slated to generate several marketable forest restoration projects by next summer, putting Oregonians back to work in communities with unemployment still over 15%.

Undoubtedly, some will find fault with the projects. Others will make excuses as to why progress should be stopped. But, the status quo of forest management is failing and our forests and rural communities are paying the price. The test projects offer an opportunity to move forward in a new direction, break the gridlock, and to put us on a path to achieve our common interest of restoring forest health.